

JOURNAL
OF
THE ROYAL SOCIETY
OF
WESTERN AUSTRALIA.

Vol. XVII.

I.—CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE FAUNA OF ROTTNEST ISLAND.

No. VII.

NOTES ON THE BANDED STILT (*CLADORHYNCHUS LEUCOCEPHALUS*), WITH A DESCRIPTION OF ITS EGGS.

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with two plates.

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Read 14th October, 1930. Published 15th January, 1931.

Descriptions of the nest and eggs of the Banded Stilt, or Rottnest Snipe *Cladorhynchus leucocephalus* (Vieillot), have appeared from time to time during the last fifty years, but one and all have subsequently been questioned or rejected because of inaccurate data. In 1913 the late A. J. North was compelled to admit "I have not seen a properly authenticated set of its eggs," and as far as we are aware these words sum up the position at the present time.

E. P. Ramsay's description of 1883¹ was rejected by A. J. North² because the eggs were found to be those of the White-headed Stilt, *Himantopus leucocephalus*, and A. J. Campbell's specimens³ collected by Lindsay Clark near Booligal on the Lachlan River, New South Wales, probably belong to the same species, for the collector, who also sent an egg to the Australian Museum, Sydney, wrote to North at a later date stating that "he had incorrectly identified the bird, and the egg belonged to the White-headed Stilt."⁴

The eggs ascribed to the Banded Stilt in the "Catalogue of the Jackson Oological collection," Sydney, 1907, most certainly do not belong to this species; they are much too small and their coloration is too dark.

In his "Birds of Australia"⁵ Gregory M. Mathews merely quoted from Ramsay, who, as we have seen, described eggs of the White-headed Stilt, and there seems little doubt that a similar mistake was made by Mathews and Iredale in 1921⁶: The descriptions of the eggs of the White-headed Stilt on page 154, and of the Banded Stilt on page 155, showing striking resemblances both in coloration and size.

1 Proc. Lin. Soc. New South Wales, VII., 1883, p. 57.

2 Nests and eggs of Birds found breeding in Aust. IV., part 3, Oct., 1913, p. 293.

3 Report of the A.A.A.S., V. Adelaide, 1893 (1894), p. 439.

4 North loc. cit.

5 Vol. III., part 2, p. 155—April, 1913.

6 A Manual of the Birds of Australia, vol. I., 1921, p. 155.

For some years one of us (L.G.) has been interested in the nesting habits of the Banded Stilt ; that a bird well known to all who visit Rottnest Island in the summer time, should keep its secret so successfully appeared worthy of investigation. It seemed unlikely that the breeding places were outside Australia, and yet information concerning the "winter migration" was of the vaguest possible character. Now and again visitors to the Museum stated they had seen the Rottnest Snipe on this or that salt lake in the interior, but never were they able to submit evidence in confirmation.

In August, 1929, a letter was received from Mr. F. A. Schoch, Head Teacher of the Kurrawang State School, asking for the name of a bird locally known as the "snipe" ; it was "13½ inches long. Head, neck, back, breast pure white ; wings black, barred lightly white ; bill black 2in. long, web-footed." The bird had been brought to the school by one of the children and was a stranger ; it seemed without doubt that this was an immature Banded Stilt, and so a request was forwarded for eggs, but without result. This year Mr. Schoch visited the lakes where the birds had been plentiful the previous winter, and as he has not reported upon the trip it is assumed that the birds were not present.

Last March Mr. T. Smith, of Kalgoorlie, asked for "comments on the migration of young 'Rottnest Snipe' which took place from a large lake some distance from Menzies this spring ; almost as soon as they were hatched they started to walk to the coast. I doubt if any reached there. I would be quite safe in saying they must have died by the hundred thousand, for a strip of country about 30 miles wide was literally white with the dead birds ; they were all in good condition and there was water in the lake they came from."

When asked for a description of the adult birds Mr. Smith wrote, "they were mainly white, faint brown band on the breast, wings black, part of the belly black, bill black, legs inclined to dirty white, feet webbed." No further news having been received from Mr. Smith, it is assumed that the birds were not noticed near Menzies this winter. It would seem, therefore, that last year the birds nested in the Menzies district, about 80 miles North of Kalgoorlie and Kurrawang, between Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie, and that they failed to return this year. At the latter locality they seem to have reared their young successfully, whilst at the former the young birds "died by the hundred thousand."

On August 4th last Mrs. B. E. Cannon, of Kukerin, forwarded a blown egg to the Museum, and in a letter enclosing three photographs asked for the name of the birds, stating "we found thousands of them on a sandy spit running out into Lake Grace. The birds have a sharp black beak, long pink legs and webbed feet ; they are black and white. This last week they have been hatching out—the chicks are white like eiderdown, with black legs and beak. On Tuesday night (July 29th) we heard many of the birds going overhead high up, and yesterday (Sunday, August 3rd) the nests were deserted, holes picked into the remaining eggs, and the chickens picked out."

A request for further material was most generously acceded to by Mr. and Mrs. Cannon, and on September 4th a consignment of no less than 23 unblown eggs was forwarded, one of them containing a dead chick about ready for hatching. As a result of this help the Museum now possesses 19 eggs and a chick.⁷

⁷ At a later date Mr. W. Broadwith, of Kukerin, who visited the Lake with Mr. and Mrs. Cannon, forwarded two adult birds in full plumage, one immature bird, and one chick (nestling in down).

The eggs show considerable variation in size, shape, coloration, and markings. The length ranges from 65 mm. to 51.75 mm., and the width from 40 to 36, the average being about 55 x 38.5 mm. The shape varies from pyriform to long oval, while the ground colour shades from dull white to cartridge buff, and the markings may take the form of heavy blotches and smaller spots or irregular lines and scribblings of blackish-brown interspersed with lines and spots of slate-grey appearing as if beneath the surface. The texture of the shell is fine, and fresh eggs would seem to possess a slight gloss.

Description of the type eggs.

A 3704. 54.25 mm. by 37.75 mm. (Plate I. fig. 1). Ground colour cartridge buff, heavily blotched with blackish-brown (3), with scattered spots of slate-grey appearing as if beneath the surface. The dark blotches unite to form large irregular patches near the broader end. Texture fine, slight gloss, pyriform.

A 3694. 54 mm. by 38 mm. (Plate I. fig. 3). Ground colour cartridge buff, with irregular lines and scribblings of blackish-brown. A faint zone of irregular slate-grey lines encircles the broader end, while irregular slate markings are scattered over the surface. Oval inclined to pyriform.

A. 3687. 53 mm. by 39 mm. (Plate I. fig. 2). Ground colour dull white, with irregular black and blackish-brown lines, more plentiful at the broader end; a few scattered spots of slate-grey appear as if beneath the surface. Swollen oval.

A 3691. 65 mm. by 36.25 mm. (Plate I. fig. 4). Dull white, with irregular lines of blackish-brown and faint slate-grey forming network over the surface. Long oval.

The Nests.

The nesting site and nests (Plate II. figs. 1 and 2) are described in a letter received from Mr. W. Broadwith, of Kukerin. "The birds have made no attempt to hide their eggs; there are some bushes on the neck of the spit and tufts of grass around the edge of the part of the spit where the birds have made their nests, but the rest of the ground is bare, the eggs being laid in small saucer-shaped depressions on the bare ground. There are not less than three eggs to a nest and not more than four. The nests are very close together—I should say at least one to the square foot. The site of the nesting ground is nearly an acre in extent."

The Nestlings.

The nestling from the egg (A 3710) measures approximately 85 mm. It is covered with whitish down black at the base, about 20 mm. long on the body, the head and neck are almost bare, the scanty down present on these parts being much shorter. The bill is slender, pointed and straight, and the feet are webbed as in the adult birds; both legs and bill are greyish (in spirit).

Measurements: Bill 12.5 mm.; tarsus 25; middle toe and nail 14.

The larger nestling (A 3716) found dead on the ground, differs but slightly from the nestling from the egg; the bill is longer and slightly recurved, and both it and the legs are blackish, the webbing being slightly paler.

Measurements: Bill 22; tarsus 37; middle toe and nail 21.5.

Remarks.

At Lake King, ninety miles East of Kukerin, the Banded Stilt was seen by Mr. E. Corboy, M.L.A., and Mr. H. S. Day, the latter writing: "These Snipe have been plentiful here at Lake King and district this winter. On Lake King, which is 22 miles long and has up to 2ft. of water in the winter time, the birds have been in tens of thousands and have reared countless chickens."

"The Snipe were not here last winter, which was a dry one, whilst this one has been very wet. Might an old bushman suggest to you that the 'Snipe' yearly select the wettest portions of the W.A. lake country for their migrations."

The type, eggs and nestlings, are in the collections of the Western Australian Museum.

Plate I.

Fig. 1.

Fig 2.

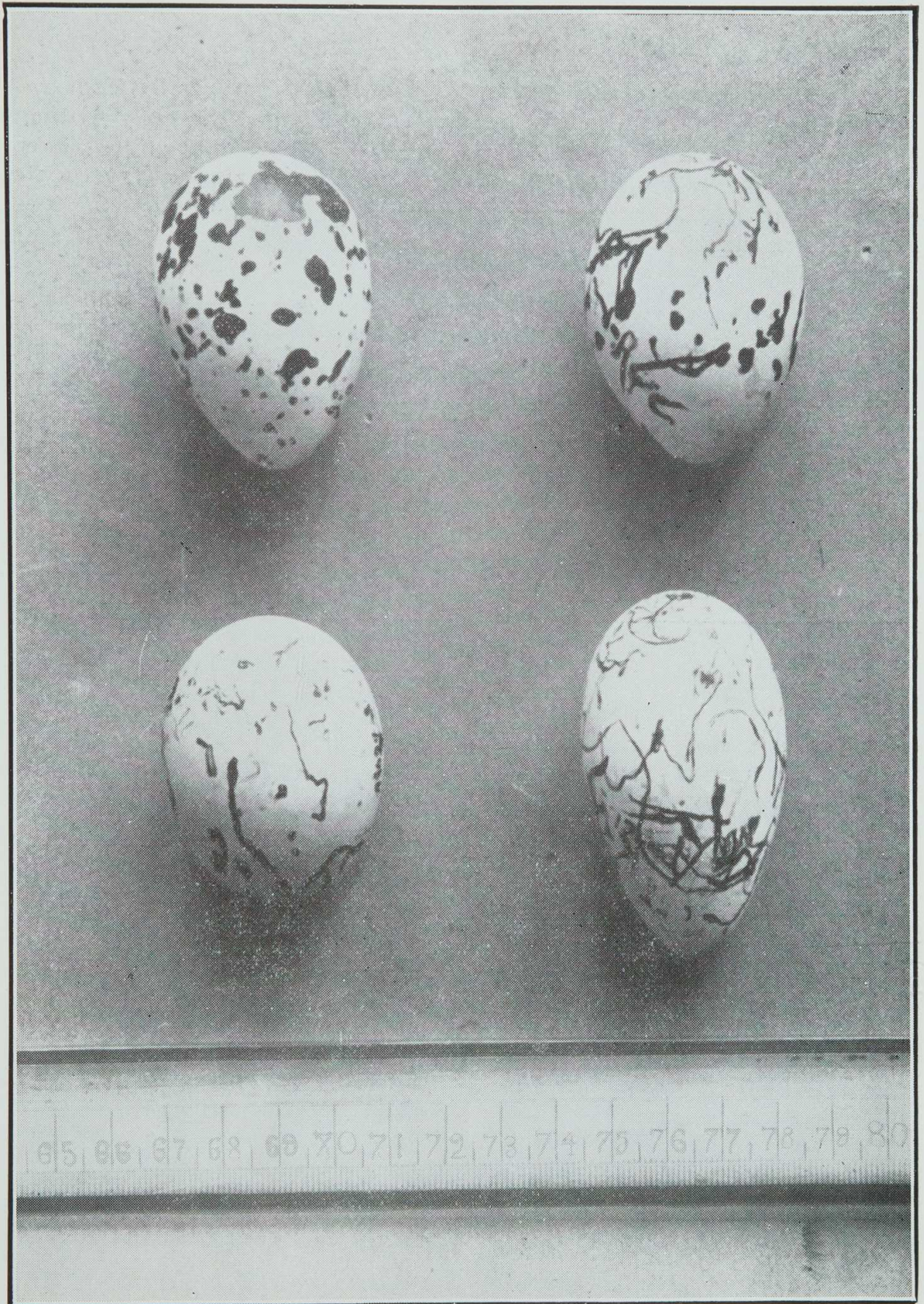


Fig 3.

Fig 4.

Plate II.

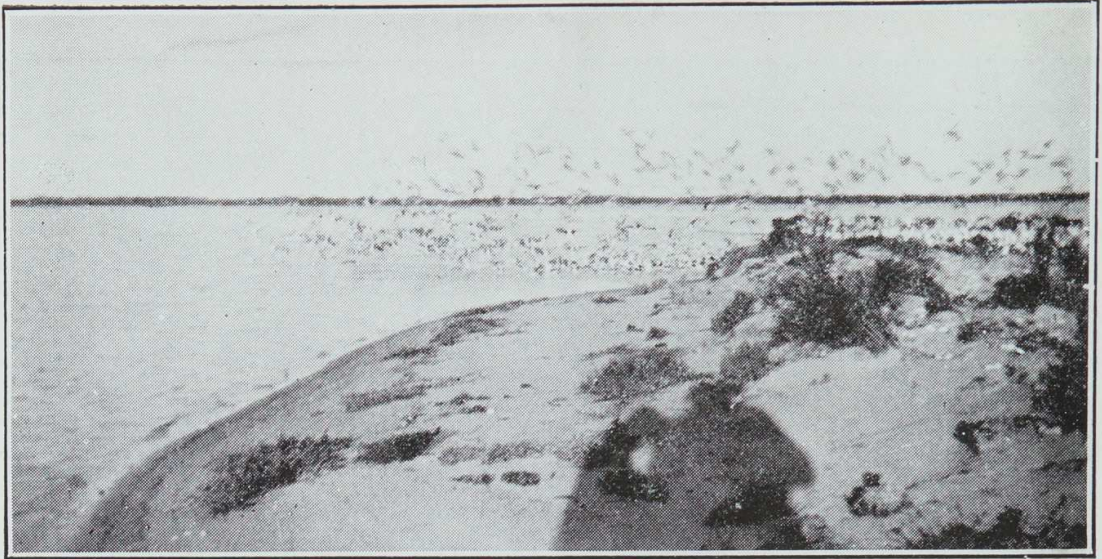


Fig. 1.

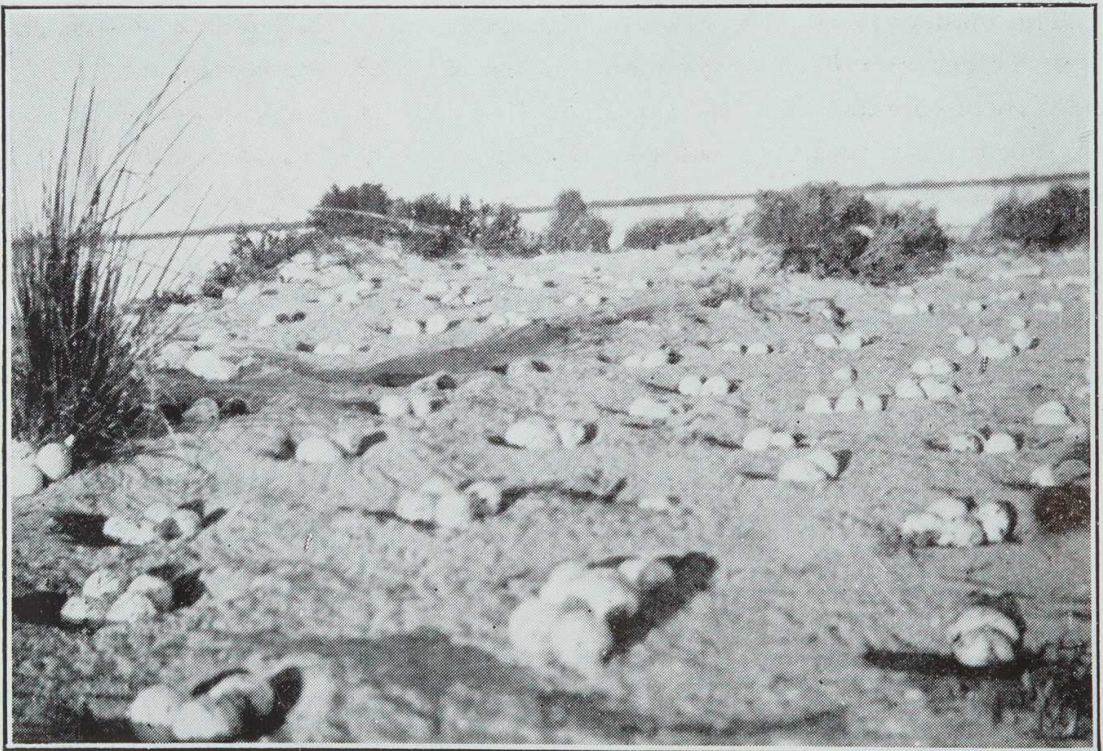


Fig. 2.